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THE ENGLISH TEACHER AND THE WORLD-WAR¹

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The spirit of the year 1917 confronts us English teachers in council with the same challenge that has halted men in every path of life—"Where do you stand with regard to the war?" Unless this question can be squarely answered all our discussion of aims and values, of courses and methods, seems trivial, drowned out by the tramp of marching men. I ask you, therefore, to consider this morning some of the directions in which we may seek our places and our justification beside those who are offering their lives for the nation. And if in so doing I say merely what is well known, what we have always taken for granted, it is because this war has revealed that much that we have so taken is by no means granted, that the very axioms of personal honor and of international faith, the heritage of the centuries, need constantly to be reaffirmed. When an English teacher in college actively foments opposition to the draft; when an English teacher in high school assigns as a composition subject "Was Abraham Lincoln a Murderer?" it is time for us as a National Council to speak out in language that admits of no misunderstanding.

For this war, more than we could have imagined, turns out to be in large measure a schoolmaster's war. It is a war of ideas, a

¹ The President's address at the seventh annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, Illinois, November 30, 1917.

war of visions. For two generations all Germany has been school-mastered into its present attitude of mind: first, by dogmatic methods of instruction, into a willing receptivity of whatever ideas might be given from the authorities; then, through this carefully schooled receptivity, into a belief in that strange imperialistic dream, and in those stranger misconceptions of all the rest of the world that have brought on the great conflict. And in the meanwhile we, stumblingly, inefficiently, have been groping our way toward the building up of quite other beliefs, quite other mental attitudes. Now that the two have come to confront each other, where do we teachers stand? Do we see our duty, and are we doing it?

Of the duties that the war imposes upon us in common with all other citizens there is no need to speak; the gaps made in many a school and college English department bear witness to the response of our colleagues to the call to arms.

Life may be given in many ways,
And loyalty to truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field,
So bountiful is Fate.
But then to stand beside her
When craven churls deride her,
To front a lie in arms, and not to yield,
This shows, methinks, God's plan
And measure of a stalwart man.

But as our stalwart men go, leaving us in our classrooms, do we not sometimes look sadly at our books, old fireside companions, and ask what right have we to remain? How may

. . . loyalty to truth be sealed
As bravely in the closet as the field?

First, let us not forget our duty as conservators of a great national tradition. This land is no free-for-all experiment station of imported doctrines, whether of imperialism or of anarchy, but an established nation, with a life and spirit of its own, rooted for more than a century, deriving its original strength from yet older soils, re-enforced, not overcome, by the newer life that it has absorbed, grown firm and staunch by toil and blood and spiritual striving. This national spirit is embodied in our literature; for

literature, if it be more than mere diversion or craftsmanship, must be the crystallization of all that is nearest to the heart of the race. And this spirit it is the special privilege of us English teachers, more than of all others, to impart, because we alone meet year after year the whole body of American youth.

Let us ask what this spirit of American literature has to say about war. A kindly and tender spirit it has been, loving the fire-side and homely thrift, the play of children, the face of the fields and woods; a God-fearing spirit, welcoming to brotherhood all nations, taking to arms with reluctance, looking confidently for peace to prevail on earth. And here some few of our number would stop, crying, "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace. Not wisely have such read the spokesmen of our national spirit. One and all abominating war, they embraced it gladly where a great principle of freedom and right was at stake. Whittier, the Quaker, friend of the humble farm laborer and mill hand, was as a trumpet to battle in the cause of the slaves. Emerson, whose essay on "War" is the best of pacifist sermons, said, "When the cannon is aimed by ideas, when men with religious conviction are behind it, when men die for what they live for . . . then gods join in the conflict, then poets are born, and the better code of laws at last records the victory." Lowell, who in the Mexican War wrote,

Ez for war, I call it Murder,
Thar you have it, plain an' flat—
I don't need to go no further
Then my testyment fer that—

knew also that

. . . . freedom ain't a gift
That tarries long in hands o' cowards,

and, when the Civil War looked blackest, stirred the hearts of the people by the prayer

God give us peace! Not such as lulls to sleep,
But sword on thigh, and brow with purpose knit!
And let our Ship of State to harbor sweep,
Her ports all up, her battle-lanterns lit,
And her leashed thunders gathering for their leap!

Moody's great ode, burning with scorn for a war he thought unjust, glories in him who battles for ideal ends,

The high heart that knew
This mountain fortress for no earthly hold
Of temporal quarrel, but the bastion old
Of spiritual wrong.
Built by an unjust nation sheer and strong,
Expugnable but by a nation's rue.

It is right that our impressionable boys and girls should hear these voices of our idealists—gentle hearted, peace loving, speaking out for war when a moral issue is at stake; and not alone voices of the past, but many a one of today, like Miss Repplier, leaving her “happy half-century” of books and friends, or Henry van Dyke, forsaking his little rivers and his kindly verse, to make the land ring with the name of France and of Belgium.

As teachers of literature, we are custodians also of the ideals of our race as to honorable conduct of war; and these too we must in some wise impart. Can we teach the Arthurian legend and allow it to be thought that chivalry has perished from the earth, that truth to one's word, succor of the helpless, generosity to the conquered, have gone down before steeled efficiency? Or shall we rather show how the spirit of chivalry has outlived the institution of knighthood and established itself in the minds of the plain people? The spirit that prompted Lee to issue to his army invading Maryland that order to respect the persons and property of non-combatants “that the honor of our army may remain unstained”; the spirit that prompted Grant to accord full honors of war to Lee's gallant men on their surrender—this spirit is shown today again and again. It is the very warp and woof of President Wilson's speeches. Think of those twelve men of Idaho who feasted their whole town in recognition of the honor that had been shown them in drafting them for the National Army! Such an act unites us spiritually with Grant and Lee, with Launcelot and Arthur. And shall we not teach our pupils that the gallantry of Mücke on the “Emden,” the magnanimity of Kreisler, still beloved in a hostile land, serve their countries better than the black deeds in Belgium and below the sea?

Were not the time too brief, I might speak, and we should do well to think, of other ideals, transcending war, basic to our

democracy in peace; of freedom, not merely from foreign dominion, not merely from enslavement, but economic freedom; of union, not merely of our states, but of all men and classes within the states, and haply of all nations in the world—State—a union based on mutual trust, mutual effort, mutual concessions, on the good of all rather than of some; or of responsibility, the habit of thinking in terms of public service rather than of private gain. But if we were only conservators of a tradition, however great, we should perhaps have difficulty in establishing the priority of our classroom work over more immediately practical forms of service. For this tradition is well rooted in the lives of our young people; witness the pride, the earnest devotion, of our boys in uniform; witness the willing acceptance of the draft; the eagerness of everyone to find some form of service. But the eyes of our youth are not on the past; they are on the future. And for that future, which none can foretell, we as English teachers can arm them with weapons of the spirit more needed in the days to come than ever before: the power to think and the power to speak the truth.

Are not these two powers after all the ultimate goal of all good instruction in composition? Too often we may confuse the means with the end; we may remain content with some device, some partial goal, some way-station. We would have our pupils write correct sentences, or well-developed paragraphs, or “forms of discourse,” or imitations of literary classics, or clever stories and verses, or journalism, or business letters. But these are mere externals, mere devices. It makes little difference whether a boy writes business letters or short stories, debates or poems; it makes all the difference whether he tells the truth in writing them. How hard it is to avoid even positive falsity—the lying advertisement, the faked news story, the tricky argument, the sentimentalized poem! And then, to fill these forms up with truth—not mere facts, but the heart of the matter!

The power to tell the truth! In this very war we have seen how some single phrase leaps from a man’s pen instinct with life, to light the way of an army or to reveal the blackness of some hidden depth. “Safe for democracy”—“the right is more precious than peace”—these have raised up thousands of men. “Scraps of paper”—“sunk without a trace”—these have been more disastrous than

great battles lost. Truth, more than ever, is today the basis of all possibility of peace; now, as ever, "the truth shall make you free."

To think clearly! How few of us in these excited times think at all! It is so easy to be blown about by every passing mood; to allow the extras to inflame or depress one; to accept and pass on hearsay opinion. But for the coming day hearsay opinion, emotional judgment, will not do; we must think; we must train our pupils to think.

What, then, does thinking mean? Does it not mean to confront the disordered facts of life with a question, to demand of them a solution, based on truth, of the ever-present problem, "what is to be done next?" We really think when we must act, and when the familiar habits of acting or the easy guesswork of trial and error will not do. Then we scrutinize the facts, the data, see what they really are, and which of them apply to our problem. Then we weave them into some sort of logical pattern and eventually come out with some answer that we can phrase in words, some plan for action—a difficult task, but one which our pupils need to learn. They need to learn of the difference in credibility among the various reports of what is going on across the water. They need to learn, not merely to draw sound conclusions about our present duty, but to think wisely and justly about the great problems of readjustment—the new diplomacy, the new world-nationalism, the new economic and social reconstruction. This rebuilding of the world is to be done by the boys and girls now in high school; and to it they need to bring a wisdom commensurate with the devotion of our men at the front. If America can take her place in the great world-family as a clear-thinking and a truth-telling nation, we shall go far to realize for our country Whitman's vision:

Thee in thy future,
Thee in thy only permanent life, career, thy own unloosen'd mind,
thy soaring spirit,
Thee as another equally needed sun, radiant, ablaze, swift-moving,
fructifying all,
Thee risen in potent cheerfulness and joy, in endless great hilarity,
Scattering for good the cloud that hung so long, that weigh'd so long
upon the mind of man.